



Side Sewer FAQs: Connections, Construction and Rates

*****UPDATED: August 16, 2011*****

The following frequently asked questions have been updated and added to, following a July 12, 2011 public meeting in Belfair and interim sewer rate ordinance adoption on August 5, 2011.

In July of 2007, Mason County Commissioners passed Ordinance 91-07 establishing that properties within 500 feet of the sewer alignment in the Belfair Urban Growth Area will be required to hook into the sewer system as it becomes available.

Connecting to the Sewer

Who must connect to the sewer now?

Existing, developed properties within Phase 1 of the Belfair Urban Growth Area, and within 500 feet of the sewer alignment are required to connect to the sewer by December 31, 2011.

Where will my sewer connection be located?

Properties required to hook into the system have been provided a “stub” in the road right-of-way to build into. Each stub location is property-dependent, but generally speaking locations were selected based upon location of nearby underground utilities, driveways, etc. Property owners will need to build a side sewer from their building to the stub in the right-of-way. More information about side sewers is available on our Side Sewer [Fact Sheet](#). Mason County will provide property owners a map confirming the exact location of their side sewer stub in early 2011.

What if my property is not located adjacent to the roadway?

The county has provided a stub for all properties, regardless of whether your property abuts the roadway or not. If your property is not located adjacent to a right-of-way (i.e. there is another property between you and the main roadway where the sewer main is located), you will need to identify an easement via a driveway or utility right-of-way to locate your side sewer. If you don't have an existing easement, you will need to coordinate with your nearby neighbors. If you have property specific questions about your side sewer connection, call our project hotline at 360-801-2482.

Do I get a stub if my property is currently vacant?

Yes. All properties required to connect to the system have been provided a stub. If your property is currently vacant, you will not be required to connect until your land is developed. A map of your side sewer stub will be filed with the Mason County Planning Department. If you decide to develop your property, you will receive a copy of the map when you file for a building permit. Vacant properties will be assessed the current connection fee at the time they are developed.

What is the timeline for building my side sewer?

The county is asking property owners to be ready for side sewer construction starting in spring 2011 and have their side sewers ready for operation by the end of 2011 (December 31, 2011). Mason County will be in touch with individual property owners in early 2011 to provide additional information about side sewer construction and payment and financing options.

What if I decide not to build a side sewer? What happens?

Properties that do not meet hook-up policies may be subject to decertification of their septic tank and increased connection fees. As of January 1, 2012, if your property is subject to Mason County Ordinance 91-07, you will be charged a higher connection fee if you do not connect during this initial hook-up phase.

Side Sewer Costs and Equivalent Residential Units

How much will a side sewer cost to build?

Property owners are responsible for construction of their side sewers. Construction costs are largely property-dependent, and will vary based on the length of your connection and the geographical constraints of your property. On average, we estimate that a typical single family side sewer will cost approximately \$4,000. Commercial and multi-family buildings will cost more.

What will the connection fee be for hooking into to the sewer?

Mason County is in the process of setting the fees for connecting to the new wastewater system. Connection fees will be based on the water use of an Equivalent Residential Unit (ERU). A single family home (2.5 people) is typically considered one ERU. Businesses and institutions will likely be multiple ERUs.

The current connect fee estimate for properties that connect to the system in 2011 is \$3,000 per ERU. This fee is available to:

- Property owners required to connect during this [first phase](#),
- Existing developed properties that cannot connect during the first phase for logistical reasons, and
- Existing developed properties in [Phase 2](#) of the wastewater system.

After startup of the sewer system, any new development and existing properties in [Phases 3 and 4](#) of the wastewater system will likely be charged a \$15,000 connection fee per ERU, however this fee is currently in review. More information about connection fees will be available as a final rate ordinance. Final connection rates will be determined through a rate ordinance passed by Mason County Commissioners in fall 2011. A public ordinance review process is anticipated.

How many gallons are in an Equivalent Residential Unit (ERU) in Belfair, and how did you determine that figure?

Every community has a unique gallons per day usage. For the purpose of financial analysis, the County and the County's financial consultants reviewed data obtained from the Belfair Water District for residential properties in the Belfair Urban Growth Area, and after adjusting for peak water periods (summer months, June - August), as well as adjusting for potential leaks and properties that were unoccupied for part of the year, 155 gallons per day was determined as average for typical single-family residential structures in Belfair. This ERU designation has been adopted by Mason County Commissioners in an interim rate ordinance; it will be fully adopted in the final rate ordinance expected at the end of the year.

Did I see different ERU benchmark numbers in earlier Belfair Wastewater publications?

Yes. During design a higher number for gallons per ERU was used for planning and system sizing purposes. The flows to any wastewater treatment plant vary throughout the year, but systems must be sized based on the "maximum month design flow," which is the largest volume of flow anticipated to occur during a continuous 30-day period, expressed as a daily average. This avoids overflows when flows go beyond the average. The Washington State

Department of Ecology suggests that new sewage plants be designed for 100 gallons per person, which if there are 2.5 people in a single family house that would equate to 250 gallons per single family home. This 250 gallon number includes the flow that is anticipated from the home, and the flow that gets into the system through inflow and infiltration (which is flow into the collection system underground through groundwater) during the peak 30 days of the year – which is a larger number than just water used by residents. And like most design criteria standards, these recommendations are conservative for planning purposes.

Why have the gallons per ERU gone down?

The purpose and method of developing the number of gallons per ERU has changed since earlier estimates. Earlier in the project, the County and the County's engineering consultant used the guidance from the Washington State Department of Ecology to plan, size and design the treatment plant. In 2011, Mason County and the County's financial consultants are developing a structure for rates and for connection charges. The method the County used for assigning the number of gallons per ERU for structuring the financial policies for the new utility is different than the method that was used for design.

ERU definition for the basis of the financial analysis is based on an evaluation of actual water usage data obtained from the Belfair Water District. This method of looking at water data in a community to develop a financial structure for a utility is a standard practice used for wastewater rate evaluation. This ERU definition looks only at flow from inside the house or business.

Until the County received additional water usage data from the Belfair Water District, ERUs for financial planning were estimates. The newly obtained water usage data from the Belfair Water District has allowed the financial planners to better define an ERU basis for their financial analysis. The average number that has been calculated locally looks only at the Belfair Urban Growth Area, excludes peak months when people might use water for irrigation, as well as those properties that may have leaks or are only used periodically, and has been determined as 155 gallons per day.

What will the monthly costs be after connecting to the sewer?

The county is still in the process of finalizing monthly rates for the new sewer system. Rates will be based on a property's ERU, and are currently estimated at \$96 per month, per ERU. Commercial properties and businesses will likely be multiple ERUs based upon water usage. Monthly rates will be finalized in a Final Sewer Rate Ordinance expected late in 2011.

Will monthly sewer rates be different for commercial businesses?

Monthly rates will be multiplied by the ERU factor for each multi-ERU property by the County. In addition, some additional fees may be assessed based upon the type of business connected – these are called strength charges, and typically are for those properties that have a larger amount of grease or other substances in their wastewater. Although begun in the interim rate ordinance in August 2011, these types of additional charges are policy decisions for consideration by Mason County Commissioners in the final rate ordinance, expected in late 2011.

How is a multi-ERU designation determined for commercial properties?

Multiple ERU's are determined based upon water usage. Commercial properties were asked to submit 12 months of water data to determine their ERU. If no water data was submitted, standardized engineering estimates were applied.

What does my connection fee pay for?

Connection fees are property owners' contribution to the capital – construction – costs of the system.

Do I have to pay the connection fee all at once?

These details will also be part of a final rate ordinance passed by Mason County Commissioners.

What does my monthly rate pay for?

Monthly fees pay for operations and maintenance, as well as some debt service for the original funding of the project.

When would connection fees go up?

Connection fees are currently anticipated to go up in January 2012. Several scenarios for the exact scale for escalation are currently under review by Mason County Commissioners, and will be established in the final rate ordinance adopted in late 2011.

I'm an existing, developed property in Phase 2 – could I get started now?

While a sewer utility is not yet available to Phase 2 properties, Phase 2 properties will be able to participate in a "capacity rental" charge that will allow them to start paying for one ERU, on a monthly basis, at the existing rate (\$3,000). Property owners that elect to begin paying the capacity charge would begin paying this monthly fee in January 2012 (approximately \$25 per month). Mason County will be providing Phase 2 properties additional information in the coming months.

Project Costs

What is the total funding available for the Belfair sewer?

Total funding available to Mason County through grants, borrowing, bond proceeds and for the county hook-up program is \$51.8 million.

Has the project gone over budget?

The facilities plan finalized in 2007 assumed a smaller project. An additional pump station, complex drainage at the wastewater treatment site, and some unexpected construction conditions caused the project to be larger in scale. In spite of those changes, the amount of borrowing required for the project has remained largely the same. Today, the project is \$48.7 million, and has \$10.5 to be paid through debt service (loans).

How much of that funding is loans that must be repaid?

As of July 2011, \$10.5 million debt to complete the project as envisioned today.

Constructing a Side Sewer

Who should I hire to build my side sewers?

Each property owner can individually select a licensed contractor to build their side sewer. A permit and inspection will be required by Mason County. The county has a list of qualified side sewers contractors to assist property owners in selecting a contractor, available on the project website: www.masoncountywastewater.com. We encourage best practices in hiring a contractor for private property work, including getting multiple bids and checking references.

Will there be a county-subsidized side sewer construction program available?

Mason County is currently developing a county-run hook-up program where property owners would elect to have a county-hired contractor build their side sewer. By hiring a contractor to build multiple side sewers, the County may be able to lower the construction costs for property owners. If you elect to participate in the county-run hook-up program, you will also have the opportunity to finance the construction costs of your side sewer through the County. A list has been developed, and more information will be available to property owners soon to evaluate if participating in this program is a good choice for them. If you are interested in the county hook up program, please call the project hotline: 360-801-2482 or email us (info@masoncountywastewater.org) for more information.

Can I build my own side sewer?

Yes, however, Mason County encourages the use of a licensed contractor. All side sewers will require an inspection by Mason County before they can become operational. If your side sewer fails to meet inspection by the county, you may be required to pay for additional inspections and will be required to accommodate any modifications necessary to make the system compliant.

Do I have to pay for a grinder pump?

If you own a single family home on the low-pressure system, Mason County will provide you with a standard grinder pump. If you are located along the gravity system and you need a pump to get the wastewater from your home to the main in the street (i.e. your home is lower than the street), you will have to purchase your own pump. Commercial properties and businesses will also be required to purchase their own grinder pumps because they may require a larger pump than the one the County will provide for single family homes. See the [Project Map](#) to locate the gravity and low-pressure systems.

Project Schedule, Decision Process, and Future Phases

What was decided in the summer 2011 in the interim rate ordinance?

The policy decision before Mason County Commissioners in July and August 2011 was an interim rate ordinance. The reason this ordinance was needed was for Mason County to legally issue permits, collect fees, and begin physically connecting property owners while construction is easiest in the summer months. The primary purpose of the interim ordinance was to establish the connection fee and the method of calculating the ERUs for Phase 1 properties that are required to connect.

What will be decided later in 2011 in a final rate ordinance?

There will be a final rate ordinance adopted in late 2011 by Mason County Commissioners, and available for public comment in the fall. This final ordinance will determine rates for future development of the system, including future phases and ERUs.

Why is there a deadline for treatment plant start up?

It's time to get our system done, and we must make a good faith effort to get it finished. Over \$30 million has been spent on construction costs. There has been significant construction hours invested into this system; it will be ready to receive wastewater this fall, and being successful means receiving wastewater. The alternative is operating a plant inefficiently – or more expensively. Getting a system up and running requires wastewater. In addition, some of the grants we have received required a system to be operational in order to receive them – that deadline is this December 2011, and we have already received one extension. We have loans to repay, and will need revenue to pay them back, both through grants, and through monthly rates. Ultimately, the purpose of this project is for environmental benefit of Hood Canal, to

comply with Growth Management, and assist economic development of Belfair and Mason County – and we need to this started as soon as possible.

When will other properties in the UGA need to connect to the system?

Mason County is already looking to get Phase 2 and beyond connected to the system with preliminary engineering. This work is expected to begin in late 2011 or early 2012. All properties within the UGA will be subject to Ordinance 91-07; when a sewer is available within 500 feet of a property line, that will trigger requirement to connect for a given property.

I heard that the fees could go down, if there were more properties connecting to the system. Is there a chance additional properties will be added to this system, who are currently outside the UGA?

Generally, a greater quantity of rate payers means that the costs are spread more widely. Some ideas have been offered by residents to include Lynch Cove or other areas into the system, in addition to future phases within the UGA. Examination of properties included in the UGA within Mason County's Comprehensive Plan is available to Mason County on an annual basis, and may be something considered by County Commissioners in the future. The soonest this could be examined would be late 2012.